

For You Are With Me

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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4th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23



Reciting the 23rd Psalm in the King James Version is comforting. Many of us memorized this psalm as a child and simply hearing the words can transport us back to another time. Whether or not you are able to recite the psalm on your own, once the congregation begins the psalm, the words seem to come to our lips not from our eyes reading them but from the well-worn grooves in our hearts and minds. These neural pathways are so deeply rooted that it is as if we join in the reciting without consciously choosing to join.

Like with the Lord's Prayer, we often recite Psalm 23 without recognizing the bold claim of the words due to their familiarity. So, I wanted us to have the communal experience of reading the King James Version in unison, and now I want you to hear these bold and comforting words from the slightly different New Revised Standard Version found in our pew Bibles on page 435.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head
with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall
dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

In 2014, I had the joy of being an adult participant on our middle school mission trip to the Heifer Ranch in Arkansas, and it was on this trip that I learned sheep are not quiet animals. Our accommodations for most of our stay was in the "Heifer Hilton," which is the affectionate term for the rustic, communal lodging facility, otherwise called the Heifer Barn. The girls were on one side of the open-air barn and the boys on the other separated only by a wall.

We were awoken during the first night to an unfamiliar sound that seemed to be coming from the boy's side. So, the girls first thought the boys were making crazy sounds just to mess with them, but in the morning light, we realized the Heifer Hilton was basically on stilts, and sheep were actually under the boy's side of the barn bleating loudly through the night. It was a memorable introduction to the animals that surrounded us that week, which included my friend the mule, who was staring at me from just a couple of feet away when I opened my eyes that first morning.

Since we didn't recognize the bleating sound as coming from sheep, it is safe to say do not have much experience with sheep in Middle Tennessee, but sheep are prevalent in Israel. Sheep were part of daily life for the Hebrew people, so this metaphor connected deeply with the original hearers of this psalm. In fact, it still speaks to those in the region today as we saw shepherds leading sheep through the hillsides during my sabbatical trip to the Holy Land in 2022.

Sheep are often given a bad rap as they aren't considered the smartest of animals, but that isn't true. Sheep are intelligent. They can quickly learn their shepherd's voice and then will only listen to it. It was fun watching videos this week of people trying to get the attention of sheep with no success, but as soon as their shepherd called out to them, the sheep immediately stopped grazing and raised their heads to listen. Then after his next command, the whole flock came running toward their shepherd to the amazement of the voices outside the camera's frame.

Sheep also have excellent peripheral vision since their eyes are on the side of their head, but this also creates a blind spot directly in front of them which causes them to rely on their excellent hearing. Sheep not only follow their shepherd but are dependent on the shepherd to do for them that which they cannot do for themselves. Sheep must rely on their shepherd to care for them in all ways - to lead them to pastures for food, to lead them to water for drink, and to lead them on safe paths that allow rest and renewal. Sheep must have complete trust in their shepherd.

Trust is another word for belief or faith. I trust the Good Shepherd to lead me in all ways at all times. As far back as I can remember, one of my favorite scriptures as been from Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding or insight." As a follower of Christ, I am called to participate in God's work in the world, but I am not to rely on my own insight. Instead, I am to ask for guidance and listen to the Good Shepherd's voice trusting He will lead me on right paths. Please do not hear me saying that I do this well, but this is what a life of faith means to me.

Living our faith involves contributing to human flourishing which is at the heart of Heifer Ranch. The purpose of the Heifer Ranch experience is to teach students about the causes of hunger and food insecurity and to inspire them to help solve our global hunger issues which certainly contribute to human flourishing. The experience culminates in spending a night in the Global Village after the students are randomly assigned to different countries where their evening living conditions range from mud huts in Guatemala, to the ground of urban slums in the US, to bamboo huts in the Philippines with food supplies reflecting the economic level of the community.

To help prepare for the experience, the staff led our group through some team building exercises. A memorable one involved an elaborate wire maze that each group member must complete while remaining blindfolded. You may already be familiar with this type of challenge, but (Spoiler alert!) the only way to successfully complete the maze is to ask for help. As you might expect, some students were quicker to ask for help than others, and there was even one student who was so sure they could figure it out on their own that they declined help even when it was offered.

The whole point of the activity was to teach the importance of asking for help, both in light of the upcoming overnight in the Global Village and as an important life lesson. In many ways our culture tells us that independence is the way to succeed in life and asking for help is a sign of weakness, but our faith and our lived experiences teach us that asking for help is a sign of strength. God didn't create us to rely solely on ourselves. God created us to be in community and to rely on God and one another. So, when we find ourselves afraid and in the darkest valleys of life, this is when we most need to fear no evil and trust that our Good Shepherd is with us.

“For you are with me” is the cornerstone of this beloved psalm for me. It isn't one of the more poetic phrases with vivid imagery of green pastures or still waters, but it is the point in this beloved psalm when psalmist begins speaking directly to the shepherd. Up until this point, the psalm has been in the third person. He makes me lie down, he leads me beside still waters, he restores, he leads me in right paths... But when we most need God, the intimacy of our relationship is revealed.

When we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, this is when we most need to trust that our Good Shepherd is with us, protecting us with His rod and comforting us with His staff. This is when we most recognize our complete dependence on our Good Shepherd to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. This is when we most need to ask for help and listen for guidance.

“For you are with you.” The Lord is always with us. We are always dependent on God, but it is in those moments of challenge, despair, and lament that our need for the Good Shepherd is most apparent. He is always there with outstretched arms ready to help as soon as we ask, as soon as we recognize our need to trust our Good Shepherd to protect, comfort, nurture, and lead us each day.

Nowhere in this psalm or the Bible are we told that the journey with Christ will be an easy one. As followers of Christ, we aren't promised a path that avoids the darkest valleys, but our Good Shepherd does promise to always be with us. Because we trust that the Lord is always with us, we can journey through the darkest valleys and emerge out of the depths. When fear wants to dominate our thoughts, may those neural pathways, those righteous grooves of love and trust, remind us of this beloved psalm of trust. This psalm that like our lives, begins and ends with God. “The Lord is my shepherd,” and “I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

The word translated here as “dwell” is translated in other places as “will return.” So, one commentary suggests that the last phrase of the psalm might best be read, “I will continually return to the Lord's presence, my whole life long.”

I appreciate this because of its emphasis on the journey. Our faith journey does not end at the conclusion of the psalm. Rather, seeking the Lord's presence is a lifelong endeavor, a continual journey until the day when we see God face to face and all things are made new.

In those moments when fear tries to take control, let us remember the bold claims of this psalm. We are the Lord's sheep. Let those well-worn neural pathways remind us that our Good Shepherd is always with us, as close as our next breath, so we need not fear. We are the ones who turn away at times, but never the Good Shepherd. Our Good Shepherd is always ready to navigate us through our blind spots. May we ask for His help not just in the darkest valleys but every day and trust His voice over the competing voices in our world.

I have this image of us, the Lord's flock, out in the world going about our life when we hear the Good Shepherd calling us. We recognize his voice, stop what we are doing to listen, and then in response to his words of love and grace, we all begin running toward him, returning to the Lord's presence our whole life long. Amen.